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Lawn&Garden Marketing

The merchandising magazine for lawn, garden and leisure living products.

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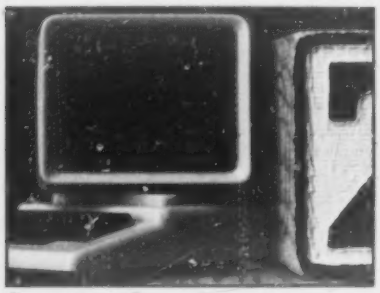

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From the Editor

It seems only appropriate that it is the beginning of a new year as I take over the editorship of this publication—a new beginning with an old understanding: that readers are earned from month to month, that there are no absolutes in publishing.

In the same way, there are no absolutes in retailing: customers are earned from project to project. One of the most important details you can learn about me is the fact that I am an avid DIYer. Home improvement projects, not least among them lawn and garden projects, are a passion of mine.

Last summer my husband and I sold our 60-year-old home, which we spent nearly four years renovating. From bathrooms to kitchens, guttering to roofing, electrical to plumbing, we tackled it all. On our acre-property were numerous fruit trees (from which I canned) and an abundance of other plant material needing care. As the property had been neglected for several years, we found ourselves in need of a chainsaw and a brushcutter; I safely learned to operate both.

In light of my own expertise, I read with interest a recent study profiling the average American DIYer. This study found that a significant number of DIYers were aged 25 and under; 80 percent of those were "frequent" or "occasional" DIYers. The study concluded that this age group "bodes well for the future as this group will be tomorrow's homeowners and heavy spenders."

On the outset, I think this conclusion is sound, though in need of considerable elaboration. I believe that compared to older DIYers, those under the age of 25 tackle projects for different reasons. Younger DIYers are most apt to have the stamina for major projects, most apt to have the time (due to fewer responsibilities) and least apt to have the money for, therefore the option of, hiring a project for completion. As DIYers age, a number of other factors enter into their decisions.

When my husband and I owned our first home, we were between the ages of 24 and 28; we had one child, fewer responsibilities and fewer obligations. Following the birth of our second child, our priorities changed; we could not conceive of tackling another renovation project. We purchased a smaller home, which required only minor decorative changes inside and relandscaping outside. We decided that, because of additional family responsibilities and two demanding careers, our time simply was too valuable. Now, we pick and choose projects based on the amount of time involved and the amount of enjoyment derived from doing it ourselves. What we see as less enjoyable projects lose out altogether. I strongly believe that young DIYers mature to make similar choices.

Lawn and garden projects will be among those projects thrown aside in favor of others if retailers don't compete effectively. The lawn and garden retailer's strongest competitor is not even in this industry; he's in a number of unrelated industries altogether. Warner Frazier, president of Simplicity Mfg., once summarized: "A big body of customers view yardwork as a chore, and we have to make sure the unpleasantness is minimized. ...We are competing with VCRs and other luxury products for the consumer's disposable income."

I think we all have something to gain from his observation: the understanding that consumers are indeed fickle and that to win them over as long-term lawn and garden customers is going to take more than a demonstration of the rewards of a successful project; you have to convince them that it's fun, too.

Susan L. Anderson

Lawn&Garden Marketing

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The new kid on the block

Computers have helped these L&G retailers build upon the business basics. Some say incorporating the units into retail operation has been as easy as ABC; others point out the stumbling blocks.

By Brad Bambarger, *editorial contributor*

Top 10 retail computer uses

1. Accounts receivable
2. Inventory control
3. Maintaining customer lists
4. General ledger
5. Reordering stock
6. Accounts payable
7. Payroll
8. Newsletters/promotions
9. Producing price labels
10. Mark-downs

Source: 1987 *LGM* questionnaire
Based on percentage of retailers using computers

Computers have a bite on nearly every aspect of our daily lives. Not only do the phone company and the stock exchange crucially depend on them, but even elementary school classrooms and preschools make use of these high-tech tools.

Nowhere are computers more prevalent or useful than in business, however. The lawn and garden retailing industry, like any other business, can benefit from the speed, accuracy and resulting efficiency of computers.

Systems boasting a variety of costs, configurations, hardware brands and software programs have flooded the market in recent years, leaving retailers awash in a sea of computer choices. When sorting through the options, retailers should keep in mind what tasks they want the computer to accomplish, then seek out the software that best fills those specific needs.

Robert Stevenson, president of Hillside Nursery, Carbondale, Ill., is a strident proponent of such a tactic when shopping for a computer. "First of all, get ahold of someone who knows software; you buy software first, not hardware. You say (to them), 'This is what I want done. What's the most' cost-effective software that'll do it for me?'" Stevenson says.

"Buying a load of hardware then learning how to make it work for you is like learning how to play poker in Las Vegas; it's going to cost you," he adds.

Stevenson, whose store posts $350,000 in annual sales, invested $3,000 in a stand-alone system two years ago. His setup consists of a Nutshell inventory software package, BPI accounting and Leading Edge word processing programs and Epson hardware. "My system just replaces the pen and paper, but it will do 97.5 percent of what a dedicated system will do," he says. A dedicated system is one in which a computer is being used for one specific function.

Tailoring a program to your needs

Vos Mower Sales in Grand Rapids, Mich., is also in the $350,000-range in annual sales, but Bernie Fridsma, president, took a different route in establishing his business in the computer age. About 10 years ago, Fridsma invested $52,000 in a dedicated system, which included Litton/Royal hardware and custom-made software. He and a hired programmer designed a set of programs ideally tailored to his operation. He explains the high cost as due to the fact that it was purchased 10 years ago. He says the same system today would likely cost $25,000.

Fridsma says the system, which is composed of five terminals and two printers, paid for itself within four years. Vos Mower Sales now uses the system for point-of-sale functions and invoicing, accounts payable and receivable, payroll, two-year parts histories, tracking warranties and, most importantly, inventory control and forecasting for more than 15,000 line items. "We don't do anything without it," he says.

Getting the works

Phil Rutt, president of Hollinger's Lawn and Garden Equipment, headquartered in Ephrata, Pa., says that after shopping a dozen other computer companies he chose a C Systems turnkey—complete software, hardware and the works—setup. He says he opted for the C Systems package because of its reasonable price and the manufacturer's willingness to somewhat customize the programs to accommodate special aspects of a particular business, such as rental

or old parts departments.

"Most software is set up to work for a vanilla-type shop; make sure the software you choose can take care of the unique needs of your business," he advises.

Hollinger's, with three stores, spent $30,000 on the complete C Systems package with IBM hardware. Rutt says the shop management and reduction of excess inventory afforded by the system quickly paid off the original costs.

Rutt adds that the trying process of turning on the whole staff to the computer is just a matter of education. "People hate the machine for the first few weeks, then they learn to love it as they learn the system," he explains.

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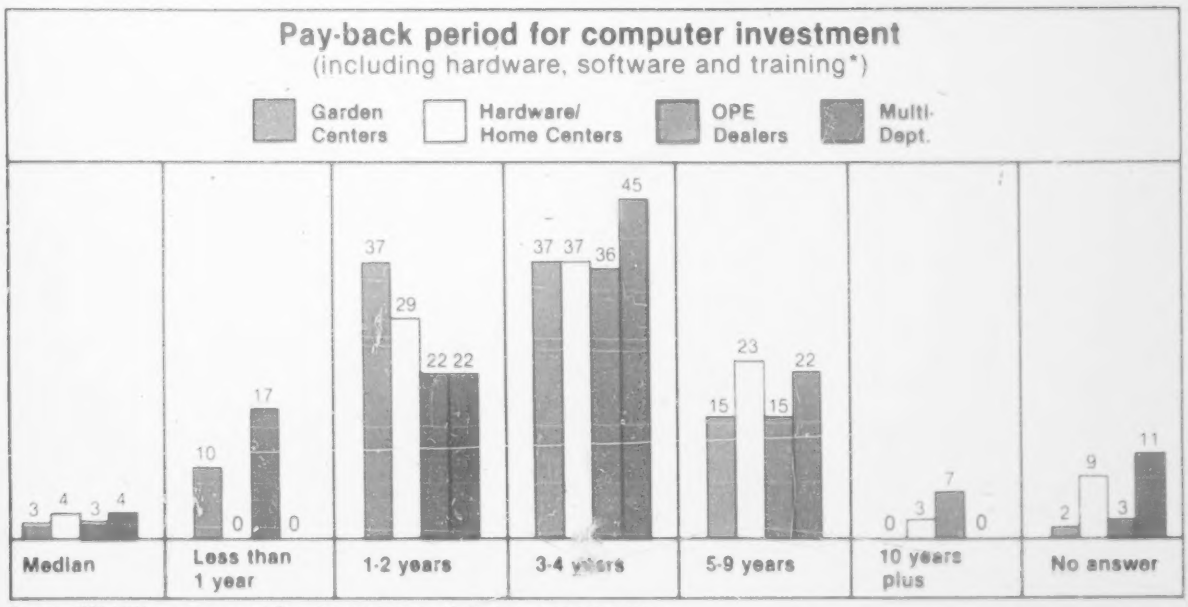

Source: 1987 *LGM* questionnaire * Based on percentage of retailers using computers

Computers...*continued*

Nancy Doane, office manager for Midstate Tractor & Equipment, Middletown, Conn., says that to help maintain an easy flow of business during installation, her staff ran the necessary cable themselves, cutting down on the inconvenience and getting the system on-line faster.

Midstate Tractor, which does $3.5 million in annual sales from its one store, has had its Softpower/Laughlin Associates system for only a few months; the company invested $13,000 for the Softpower software and AST hardware.

Getting the support you need

One of the major considerations when choosing a system, ranking alongside suitable software and optimum price, is service—that is, easily obtained and expert support from the software manufacturer. Doane raves about the support Midstate Tractor has received from the Softpower people, reporting that the company is readily available by phone to answer questions toll-free and can solve certain problems directly long distance via a modem (telephone-computer) hookup.

The consensus among many retailers who employ computers is that the most profit-generating portion of the system is the automatic inventory control. The computer keeps track of everything after each sale, lets you know at the touch of a button just what you have, orders stock when you're out and generally trims the fat off your inventory.

When it comes to inserting the mass of inventory information into the computer's memory, some software vendors will input it for a client. The National Farm and Power Equipment Dealer's Association, which markets the Challenger system, handles such tasks as part of a two-week, on-site training program. A major element in Anne and Barry Dattalo's decision to lease their computer from Ideal Computer Systems was that the software was designed *by* a power equipment dealer *for* a power equipment dealer. A more specific, as well as attractive, feature of the program was its ability to use the original equipment manufacturer's own part numbers. Some programs necessitate having the user create an entirely new numbering system to apply to the inventory. To reassign new numbers to a 42,000-item inventory, such as the Dattalo's, would simply be overwhelming.

The Dattalo's, who own A&B Outdoor Equipment in Nederland, Texas, were able to eliminate one employee, whom Barry characterizes as a full-time record keeper, thanks to the workload assumed by the computer. This company's system not only handles the big jobs that help cut overhead, but Barry says the system also does little things, such as figure sales tax reports at the end of the month.

However, Barry stresses that for all the good a computer can bring to your retail operation, it can't run it for you. "The first thing a retailer needs to do is understand his business—what it takes to make a profit. He's got to realize what a computer is. It's a number cruncher; it only puts out what you put in," he says.

Jack Jones, owner of a complete lawn and garden center in Auburn and one in Redmond, Wash., both of which carry nursery goods, chemicals, power equipment and pet supplies, had a less-than-gratifying experience with his first foray into computerized retailing several years ago. He says he received poor results and nearly non-existent support for his initial software programs, which he says were ostensibly geared for wholesaling rather than retailing.

continued on page 12...

Brands of hardware used

	Multi-Dept. %	Garden Centers %	Hardware/ Home Centers %	OPE Dealers %
IBM	20.0	14.8	15.1	11.8
Triad	10.0	1.6	22.6	1.8
Texas Instruments	–	1.6	7.6	6.4
Apple	–	13.1	3.8	0.9
Radio Shack	–	6.6	–	2.7
Commodore	–	1.6	–	3.6
Tandy	–	1.6	–	3.6
AT&T	–	4.9	–	0.9
Kaypro	–	1.6	3.8	0.9
Altos	10.0	1.6	–	0.9
Basic Four	10.0	3.3	–	–
Digital	10.0	1.6	–	0.9
Epson	–	1.6	–	1.8
Pertec	–	3.3	1.9	–
Televideo	–	1.6	1.9	0.9
Columbia	–	–	–	1.8
DEC	–	1.6	1.9	–
North Star	–	–	–	1.8
Sayno	–	–	–	1.8
Wang	–	1.6	1.9	–
Other	10.0	21.3	–	10.9

Source: 1987 *LGM* questionnaire
Based on 234 respondents

Computers *continued*

However, Jones says his present venture has been "like night and day compared to the previous software company." Jones' stores, which do around $3 million in annual sales, are outfitted with a complete package from Triad Systems Corp. The eight-terminal setup cost about $80,000 after a discount from the trade-in of Jones' previous system.

Jones is sold on buying a turnkey system from one supplier vs. buying the software and hardware separately; a turnkey system is a complete hardware/software setup from one supplier, which allows the owner to "turn the key" and go. He insists that it can be "a real plus to call just one toll-free number for any questions about any part of the system."

Pay only for what you need

Not every dealership needs to invest enormous sums of money into a state-of-the-art computer system, however. You should only pay for what you can use. One retailer likened using a certain expensive, powerful software program not ideally suited for a medium-sized lawn and garden retailer to "using an 18-wheeler to cart your groceries home."

Michael Reesey, owner of Michael's Power Equipment, Timonium, Md., advises retailers to "shop around and realize that you can get effective computer setups for not that much money; you don't have to spend a fortune to do the job."

Reesey is so pleased with the performance and support of his Icas system that he is going to purchase an identical one for a second store he's opening. He says he has no doubt his computer saves his employees' time, thus making his business more profitable.

Making your computer a marketing tool

Creative uses of a computer—uses beyond inventory control or accounting functions—can turn a system into a true marketing, money-making implement. Debi Ledford, office manager of Crabapple Nursery and Landscaping, Roswell, Ga., uses a Slice/Thornton Computer Management system, which is utilized for, among other things, putting together a monthly newsletter. The system was created especially for nurseries and garden centers.

Crabapple's newsletter consists of a main feature article written by the owner or one of the store's landscape architects plus sales information and gardening tips. From composition on the computer to the outside printing company to the postage, the newsletter costs only $1,000 a month to produce. Two and a half years ago, the newsletter went out to 500 Crabapple customers; it now has a circulation of 6,500.

Ledford testifies that a newsletter is one of the most cost-effective ways to advertise a business. "It's definitely one of the best things we ever could have done," she says.

Another cost-effective way to advertise is through the use of co-op ads. And one computer company makes *buying* its software even more cost-effective; Select Media Inc., Hopkins, Minn., claims that its specialized accounting software, S.M.I.L.E.S., tracks co-op advertising and will give a return on investment in six months or less. The program tracks claims and organizes co-op advertising for retailers—one use for a computer

Software programs used

	Multi-Dept. %	Garden Centers %	Hardware/ Home Centers %	OPE Dealers %
Triad	10.0	1.6	17.0	0.9
Lotus	10.0	4.9	1.9	0.9
Excaliber by Armor	–	–	–	4.6
Peachtree	–	–	3.8	2.7
The Profit System (PFS)	–	–	–	4.6
Apple	–	3.3	1.9	0.9
Dealer Informations Systems (DIS)	–	–	–	3.6
Radio Shack	–	3.3	–	1.8
Dbase	–	3.3	1.9	–
National Farm Power	–	–	–	2.7
Pace (Ace Hardware)	–	–	5.7	–
Word Perfect	–	3.3	1.9	–
Word Star	–	3.3	1.9	–
Accounting Plus	–	–	–	1.8
ADP	10.0	–	–	0.9
Basic Four	10.0	1.6	–	–
BPI	–	1.6	1.9	–
CSC	–	–	1.9	0.9
John Deere	–	–	–	1.8
Great Plains	–	1.6	–	0.9
IBM	10.0	–	1.9	–
Slice	–	3.3	–	–
Supercalc	–	1.6	1.9	–
Xtra Soft	–	–	–	1.8
Other	50.0	49.2	24.5	16.4
Written in-house/custom	–	11.5	5.7	10.0

Source: 1987 *LGM* questionnaire
Based on 234 respondents

about which many retailers may not have given any thought.

"It's a software that not only saves the retailer lost co-op dollars but makes money too. Its purpose is control for the retailers since it's his money to begin with," says Jane Denny, Select Media vice president.

To understand truly what you're getting into and what you may get out of it, many computerized retailers suggest that before settling on a computer system, go to a shop that's using the system in question and watch it work. Seeing a system function in a busy environment similar to your own will make a decision easier. Also, think ahead and plan for a system that will be able to expand; you don't want to outgrow your investment. —LGM

For more information about hardware or software programs mentioned in this article, contact:

Acacia Software, P.O. Box 90525, Santa Barbara, CA 93190; 805-962-4516.

C Systems Software, 1499 Regal Row, Dallas, TX 75247; 214-634-4442.

Data Line Corp., 43 Danbury Rd., Wilton, CT, 06897; 203-762-2473.

Icas Computer Systems, 160 Woodport Rd., Sparta, NJ 07871; 201-729-3197.

Ideal Computer Systems Inc., 2345 Blairs Ferry Rd. NE, Cedar Rapids, IA 52402; 319-393-0228.

InfoVision, 2040 Great Highway, San Francisco, CA 94116; 415-566-4041.

Laughlin Associates Inc., 186 Grassy Plain St., P.O. Box 647, Bethel, CT 06801; 203-798-0469.

NFPEDA, 10877 Watson Rd., St. Louis, MO 63126-0517; 314-821-0674.

Select Media Inc., 532 Fifth Ave. S., Hopkins, MN 55343; 612-933-1014.

Thornton Computer Management Systems, 424 East US 22, Maineville, OH 45039; 800-543-7249.

Triad Systems Corp., 1252 Orleans Dr., PO Box 61779, Sunnyvale, CA 94088-1779; 408-734-9720.

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